

Attraction Inequality and the Dating Economy

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Jesus said that the poor would always be with us. Despite the best efforts of philanthropists and redistributionists over the last two millennia, he has been right so far. Every nation in the world has poor and rich, separated by birth and luck and choice. The inequality between rich and poor, and its causes and remedies, are discussed ad nauseam in public policy debates, campaign platforms, and social media screeds.

However, the relentless focus on inequality among politicians is usually quite narrow: they tend to consider inequality only in monetary terms, and to treat "inequality" as basically synonymous with "income inequality." There are so many other types of inequality that get air time less often or not at all:

inequality of talent, height, number of friends, longevity, inner peace, health, charm, gumption, intelligence, and fortitude. And finally, there is a type of inequality that everyone thinks about occasionally and that young single people obsess over almost constantly: inequality of sexual attractiveness.

The economist Robin Hanson has written some fascinating articles that use the cold and inhuman logic economists are famous for to [compare inequality of income to inequality of access to sex](#). If we follow a few steps of his reasoning, we can imagine the world of dating as something like an economy, in which people possess different amounts of attractiveness (the dating economy's version of dollars) and those with more attractiveness can access more and better romantic experiences (the dating economy's version of consumer goods). If we think of dating in this way, we can use the analytical tools of economics to reason about romance in the same way we reason about economies.

One of the useful tools that economists use to study inequality is the Gini coefficient. This is simply a number between zero and one that is meant to represent the degree of income inequality in any given nation or group. An egalitarian group in which each individual has the same income would have a Gini coefficient of zero, while an unequal group in which one individual had all the income and the rest had none would have a Gini coefficient close to one. When Jeff Bezos or Warren Buffett walks into a room, the Gini coefficient of the room shoots up.

Some enterprising data nerds have taken on the challenge of estimating Gini coefficients for the dating "economy." Among heterosexuals, this actually means calculating two Gini coefficients: one for men, and one for women. This is because heterosexual men and heterosexual women essentially occupy two distinct "economies" or "worlds," with men competing only with each other for women and women competing only with each other for men. The Gini coefficient for men collectively is determined by women's collective preferences, and vice versa. If women all find every

man equally attractive, the male dating economy will have a Gini coefficient of zero. If men all find the same one woman attractive and consider all other women unattractive, the female dating economy will have a Gini coefficient close to one. The two coefficients do not directly influence each other at all, and each sex collectively sets the Gini coefficient—that is, the level of inequality—for the other sex.

A data scientist representing the popular dating app “Hinge” [reported on the Gini coefficients he had found](#) in his company’s abundant data, treating “likes” as the equivalent of income. He reported that heterosexual females faced a Gini coefficient of 0.324, while heterosexual males faced a much higher Gini coefficient of 0.542. So neither sex has complete equality: in both cases, there are some “wealthy” people with access to more romantic experiences and some “poor” who have access to few or none. But while the situation for women is something like an economy with some poor, some middle class, and some millionaires, the situation for men is closer to a world with a small number of super-billionaires surrounded by huge masses who possess almost nothing. According to the Hinge analyst:

On a list of 149 countries’ Gini indices provided by the CIA World Factbook, this would place the female dating economy as 75th most unequal (average—think Western Europe) and the male dating economy as the 8th most unequal (kleptocracy, apartheid, perpetual civil war—think South Africa).

[Quartz reported on this finding](#), and also cited [another article about an experiment with Tinder](#) that claimed that that “the bottom 80% of men (in terms of attractiveness) are competing for the bottom 22% of women and the top 78% of women are competing for the top 20% of men.” These studies examined “likes” and “swipes” on Hinge and Tinder, respectively, which are required if there is to be any contact (via messages) between prospective matches.

Another study, [reported in Business Insider](#), found a pattern in messaging

on dating apps that is consistent with these findings. Yet another study, [run by OkCupid on their huge datasets](#), found that women rate 80 percent of men as “worse-looking than medium,” and that this 80 percent “below-average” block received replies to messages only about 30 percent of the time or less. By contrast, men rate women as worse-looking than medium only about 50 percent of the time, and this 50 percent below-average block received message replies closer to 40 percent of the time or higher.

If these findings are to be believed, the great majority of women are only willing to communicate romantically with a small minority of men while most men are willing to communicate romantically with most women. The degree of inequality in “likes” and “matches” credibly measures the degree of inequality in attractiveness, and necessarily implies at least that degree of inequality in romantic experiences. It seems hard to avoid a basic conclusion: that the majority of women find the majority of men unattractive and not worth engaging with romantically, while the reverse is not true. Stated in another way, it seems that men collectively create a “dating economy” for women with relatively low inequality, while women collectively create a “dating economy” for men with very high inequality.

Social commentators today are very interested in “gender gaps,” especially the alleged difference in pay between men and women who do the same work. There are other notable gaps, including a “libido gap” that is well-documented in scientific literature (with men desiring sex much more frequently and intensely than women on average) and also an “age gap” in which younger adults are described as more attractive on average, with an especially large age disadvantage for older women. The Gini coefficient gap indicated in these studies is something like a “sexual inequality gap” or “attractiveness distribution gap,” less obvious but potentially even more socially significant than some other better-known gender gaps.

There are no villains in this story. Nobody can or should be blamed for his or her honest preferences, and if women collectively believe that most men are

unattractive, what grounds does anyone, male or female, have to argue with them? We may pity the large majority of men who are regarded as unattractive and who have few or no romantic experiences while a small percentage of attractive men have many. Just as much, consider that we live in a monogamous culture, and so the 20 percent of men who are regarded as attractive can only be in committed relationships with at most 20 percent of women. We may just as well pity the rest of the women, who are destined to be in committed relationships, if they pursue a relationship at all, with someone who they regard as unattractive. The only villain in this story is nature, which has molded our preferences so that this tragic mismatch of attraction and availability occurs.

To those who study nature, the various gender gaps in romantic life will not come as a surprise. Evolutionary biologists have seen these types of patterns many times before and can explain each of them. The relative perceived attractiveness of younger women vs. older can be explained by the higher fertility of younger adult women. The libido gap can be explained by the different mating strategies instinctively pursued by the distinct sexes.

As for the different Gini coefficients consistently reported for men and women, they are not consistent with a monogamous social structure in which most people can pair with someone of comparable perceived attractiveness. However, this is not surprising: monogamy is rare in nature. The revealed preference among most women to attempt to engage romantically only with the same small percentage of men who are perceived as attractive is consistent with the social system called "polygyny," in which a small percentage of males monopolize the mating opportunities with all females, while many other males have no access to mates. Again, this will not come as a surprise to scientists. The evolutionary biologist David P. Barash wrote an article in *Psychology Today* titled ["People Are Polygynous,"](#) citing extensive biological and historical evidence that throughout most of history, our species has practiced "harem polygyny," a form of polygamy.

There are many animals of all kinds that practice polygyny in one form or another, including many of our primate relatives like gorillas and lemurs. For animals, social structures are not an object of reflection or systematic attempted reform—they just do what their instincts and upbringing dictate. But it is the destiny of humans to constantly fight against nature. We light fires for warmth, build air conditioners for cooling, invent soap and plumbing and antibiotics and trains and radios in an effort to conquer the constraints of nature. But when we turn on our smartphones built on ingeniously developed transistors that show we can overcome nature's entropy, we log on to dating apps and enter a world that is built on shadows of the social structures of our primeval savanna ancestors. Technology has not enabled us to escape the brutal social inequalities dictated by our animal natures.

This is not to say that we haven't tried. The institution of monogamy is itself a "redistributive" type of policy: like capping the income of billionaires, it caps the total allowed romantic partners of the most attractive, so that unattractive people have much better chances to find a partner. The marriages that we read about in historical accounts that are based on prudence and family arrangement make more sense when we realize that basing marriage on mutual attraction leads so many—both men and women—to be unsatisfied with the outcome, since most women find most men unattractive. All of the world's great religious traditions have extolled chastity as a great virtue and taught that there are higher goals than sexual satisfaction—these teachings add meaning to the otherwise "poor" lives of the majority of people who are regarded as perpetually unattractive.

Even in centuries-old fairy tales like *The Frog Prince* and *Beauty and the Beast*, we see our culture's attempt to come to terms with the paradigm of a woman regarded as attractive pairing with a man who she regards as unattractive. The differing Gini coefficients faced by men and women guarantee that this will be a common—or even the most common—romantic pairing in a monogamous culture. In these fairy tales (depending on which version you read), the beautiful woman first accepts or even loves

the hideous man. The sincere love of a woman transforms the unattractive man into something better: more handsome, richer, and royal. Allegorically, these stories are trying to show men and women a way to relate one-on-one even though most women find most men unattractive; they are trying to show that sincerely offered love, and love based on something other than sexual attraction, can transmute ugliness to beauty and make even a relationship with unmatching attractiveness levels successful.

As Western civilization declines or at least frays at the edges, the ways our culture has developed to deal with the gap in the attractiveness distribution are receding and dying. Young people enter the equality-inducing institution of monogamy later and later or not at all, spending more time in a chaotically unequal polygynous dating world. Monogamy itself is weaker, as divorce becomes easier and even married people often report encountering "dead bedrooms" in which one or both spouses feel no obligation to give a partner who they do not regard as sufficiently attractive access to sexual experiences. Religious belief is in constant decline, and with it declines the belief in the dignity of celibacy or the importance of anything other than hedonism (sexual or otherwise). Even fairy tales that for centuries helped us understand how to live charitably with each other are disavowed and cultural tastemakers like [Time Magazine](#) and the [BBC](#) denigrate them as sexist.

The result of these cultural changes is that the highly unequal social structures of the prehistoric savanna homo sapiens are reasserting themselves, and with them the dissatisfactions of the unattractive "sexually underprivileged" majority are coming back. It is ironic that the progressives who cheer on the decline of religion and the weakening of "outdated" institutions like monogamy are actually acting as the ultimate reactionaries, returning us to the oldest and most barbaric, unequal animal social structures that have ever existed. In this case it is the conservatives who are cheering for the progressive ideal of "sexual income redistribution" through a novel invention: monogamy.

As always, the way forward will be difficult. It may be impossible to revive the religions, behaviors, institutions, and norms that have recently governed the world of love and sex but are in retreat around the world. The future of Western civilization may need brave new institutions and brave new ways for men and women to fruitfully relate to each other. Whatever rules govern the future of dating and sex, they should find a way to deal with the polygynous instincts that our species has historically possessed and that show up in the present day in the statistics of our dating apps, or else be willing to accept the risk of sexual conflict and war that have historically accompanied high inequality. Technologies and institutions and even religions come and go, but the evidence indicates that sexiness inequality is here to stay and that we will ignore it only at our peril.

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